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of Tenses in Discourse

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Sequence of tenses in discourse

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The purpose of this report is to make explicit what governs the distribution of tense in an SOT environment.

In the first place, we presented our temporal interpretation framework, discussing five factors involved in temporal interpretation of sentences in discourse (the tense system, temporal specifiers, situation type, predicate semantic class, and text): we first developed a tense system in which there are two elements (Speech Time and Event Time) involved in the description of the tenses, assuming the Aux-as-main verb hypothesis; then we showed that temporal specifiers (deictics, dependents, and flexible anchorings), situation type (static or nonstatic), predicate semantic class (assertive or nonassertive) are crucial for temporal interpretation of sentences in discourse; finally we insisted that a principle of 'textual cohesion' also plays an important role in temporal interpretation of sentences on the assumption that each sentence in discourse is related to a unifying topic of discourse, because a single sentence is scarcely used independently. For example, we need temporal information from another sentence (i.e., textual reference time) to interpret a sentence which does not have enough temporal information. In short, whenever we interpret sentences in discourse we are assuming that speakers or writers obey the convention 'Be relevant' (Be relevant to (i) discourse topic, (ii) textual reference time) to make their contributions coherent in discourse.

And then we reviewed three previous analyses of SOT in English (Costa(1972), Comrie(1986), and Riddle(1978)), and pointed out their defects; Costa accounts for apparent violations of SOT by appealing to

the notion of "factivity". In short, he claims that factive verbs allow optional SOT but nonfactive verbs impose obligatory SOT. Although his analysis seems to be on the right track, it should be criticized for the following reason: there are many examples where nonfactive verbs don't require obligatory SOT; Comrie claims that tense selection in an SOT environment is governed by the rule of sequence of tenses. But, in English there are a lot of exceptions to Comrie's SOT rule; Riddle's claim is that the choice of tense in a complement depends on whether or not the speaker wants to convey certain implications (i.e., speaker belief, subject involvement, and unresolved state of affairs) associated with the use of the tenses. Contrary to her claim that the present tense in an SOT environment indicates the speaker belief in the truth of the complement in one case and "subject involvement" in another case, we can use a present tense even though we don't believe in the truth of the complement or the matrix subject is actually considered to have no current involvement in the situation in the complement. Thus, we attempted to analyze SOT phenomena within our framework.

What is the crucial factor in determining tense choice in an SOT environment? we concluded as follows: a principle of textual cohesion determines tense selection in a complement on the same basis that it is selected in main clauses, except in a few cases, which can be easily explained in terms of the notion of speaker assertions. Thus, there is no sequence of tenses rule in English.